HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE OF SLACK ALLEY

The area in Catherine Hill Bay known as Slack Alley lies between the cemetery and the houses that border the eastern side of Flowers Drive and Northwood Road. It is within the curtilage of the State Listed Heritage Township of Catherine Hill Bay.

Catherine Hill Bay has been listed on the State Heritage Register partly because it is a fine example of the key role played by 19th century company towns in the development of Australian resources**.**

Company towns, such as Catherine Hill Bay, existed in isolated areas. Distance from urban areas such as Newcastle meant that it was too far for miners to travel daily to the mine. In 1889 the Wallarah Coal Company built the jetty; the railway that joined the jetty to the mine, two and a half miles north; a sawmill and “14 cottages occupied and others in progress”

The early days of coal mining were labour intensive and more miners worked in the pit than could be accommodated in the housing provided by the Wallarah Coal Company. Some of the miners lived under canvas while others requested permission from the Mine Manager to build their own shacks on company land and paid a small ground rent.

When Coal & Allied bought the coal leases in the 1960s they did not wish to continue to run the town along ‘company town’ lines. Most of the miners now owned their own transport and technological improvements in mining meant a much smaller workforce was needed. The company owned housing stock was in a scandalous condition. Rather than fix the houses Coal & Allied sold the houses that lined Flowers Drive, Northwood Road, Clarke and Lindsley Streets to the miners and adopted a policy of demolishing all the other houses as soon as they became vacant. The 4 remaining houses in Slack Alley were never put on title; the coal company still owns the land and has previously tried to evict the occupiers. Coal & Allied has informed these households that their houses can never be sold or passed onto family members.

The railway embankment dissected Slack Alley. Prior to 1908 a series of 6 small houses lined the eastern side of the railway embankment. Only one of these houses remains. There were 12 other small dwellings in Slack Alley, some were ‘batches’, occupied by single men and others were occupied by families. All were built by the miners with company approval. Val Darcy who lived in one of these houses told me that her father “built the house with a hammer and an adze”.

Slack Alley had its own supply of fresh water. There still exists a well from which the Bowling Club draws its water. Fresh water was a constant problem for Catherine Hill Bay. It was difficult to gather enough water from the roofs of the houses as the roof areas were so small. Fresh water from the Moonee Stream was never available to the miners. This water was only connected to the mine and to staff houses. This was a source of contention between the miners and the company and reflected the stratification of society in Catherine Hill Bay. The staff houses in what is now known as Colliery Road were connected to the Moonee Water supply and this area was known as “Snob Hill”.

“The Catherine Hill Bay Cultural Precinct is state significant for its associations with coal mining, organised labour, and early maritime industry in NSW. It is located on the oldest coal mining lease in NSW, Consolidated Coal Lease 706. It is associated with the earliest examples of industrial action in NSW and with the evolution of unionised labour in the state”. Slack Alley played an integral part in this. The mine at Catherine Hill Bay was kept in production during strikes by the introduction of “scabs” brought in by ship and moved to camps under police protection. There were strikes in 1933 and a nationwide strike in 1949. All the coal mined by these scabs was left in huge dumps in Slack Alley because the miners when they returned to work refused to touch this coal or load it onto ships. These dumps would spontaneously catch fire and were a trial to the women whose lines of washing would suffer and to the children who fell into them while playing.

It shows a lack of understanding on the part of Coal & Allied about the nature of heritage to assert that the heritage value of Catherine Hill Bay is about “streetscape”. It is about the setting within the landscape and relationships that existed between each of these. It is also about people, the miners, their families, the Mine Manager and the staff and the complex ways in which these groups related to each other and their surroundings.

The Independent Hearing and Assessment Panel did understand the relational aspect of heritage and said that there should be no development at Slack Alley. To make sure that this does not happen the zoning must be E2.